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Abstract

Several people have tried, unsuccessfully, to learn the facts about J. D. Salinger's life. The little information available from secondary sources about Salinger indicates that "The Catcher in the Rye" has autobiographical elements. Salinger's life parallels Holden's fictional adventures in that Salinger (1) was born and reared through early childhood in New York City, (2) attended the McBurney School mentioned in "Catcher" and Valley Forge Military Academy, which served as the prototype for Holden's Pencey Prep, (3) was unconventional, (4) spent time in Maine and had an inordinate interest in the Museum of Natural History, (5) twisted half-truths to let people believe what they wanted, (6) was charitable with money, (7) loved innocence, (8) was both interested in and contemptuous of the film industry, and (9) desired to live away from society. (MP)

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J. D., D. B., SONNY, SUNNY, AND HOLDEN

Edward R. Ducharme

J. D. Salinger is reported to have become very angry when questioned about autobiographical elements in the short story "For Esme: With Love and Squalor." During the conversation that followed he denied that anything he had ever written was autobiographical. On another occasion Salinger authorized the "fact" that he was living in Westport, Connecticut, when he was actually living in Cornish, N. H.[1] Years earlier—writing to *Esquire* in a note accompanying "This Sandwich Has No Mayonaise" (a story in which the death of Holden Caulfield is reported)—Salinger himself asserted that his own Air Corps background had helped in the writing of the story. In the same comment he indicated that he wished to serve in a chorus line after the War was over.[2] W. J. Weatherby, writing in the *Twentieth Century,* quotes Salinger as having said: "It is my subversive opinion that a writer's feelings of anonymity—obscurity, are the second-most valuable property on loan to him during his personal years." [3]

The point of all the above is that there is little from Salinger himself on his own life, particularly from 1951 onwards, or, shortly after the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye.* Even those comments given during the earlier years, some of which are referred to above, are a mixture of half-truth and whimsey, difficult sources for the biographer. Yet, in the twentieth century, no man can escape detection altogether; some facts emerge about even the most careful. From those about Salinger can be pieced together a small amount of data relevant to the study of *The Catcher in the Rye* from an autobiographical standpoint. One point must be stressed in reading all of the following: almost every assertion about Salinger's life is from a secondary source and must be regarded as such.

The available facts are as rare and as puzzling as Salinger's stories. There have been several attempts but few successes in the search for facts. Perhaps the most widely used source is William Maxwell's brief biography appearing in the July, 1951, Book-of-the-Month Club *News.* Two of the more ambitious at-

[1] Ernest Haveman, "The Search for the Mysterious J. D. Salinger," Life (November 3, 1961), p. 129.
[2] "Backstage with Esquire," Esquire (October, 1945), p. 34.
[3] W. J. Weatherby, "Rejection World," Twentieth Century (Spring, 1962), p. 72.

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tempts are the *Time* and *Life* articles already mentioned. These less than complete accounts have received considerable attention. Henry Anatole Grunwald has a lengthly biographical section in his *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait,* the major portion of which is a reprinting of the *Time* and *Life* articles and references to the Maxwell piece. The scarcity of material can be most readily seen when one realizes that even the learned critics have relied upon news magazine articles and a book club notice, sources frequently maligned in literary research. In addition to the above there is a brief passage by Salinger himself in the *First Supplement* to *Twentieth Century Authors.* Finally, one can—if diligent enough—discover a few more things by studying old issues of *Esquire* and *Story* magazines. These are the worthwhile sources.

The attempt to relate the facts to the novel reveals little in the way of extended and extensive material. The simplest facts come first. Salinger and Holden were both born in New York City and spent their early years there. Both attended several secondary schools and left at least one for academic reasons. Salinger attended the McBurney School when he was thirteen, leaving at the end of one year. The McBurney School appears by name in the novel: It is this school that Pencey Prep was scheduled to have a fencing meet with on the day that Holden left the foils on the subway. Related to this point is Grunwald's assertion that Salinger was at one time the manager of the fencing team in one of the schools he attended.[4] Salinger attended the McBurney School because of his parents' concern over his work. Holden was also placed in several schools.

After the McBurney School experience, Salinger went to Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne, Pennsylvania, the same state in which Pencey Prep is located. The two schools are alike in other respects. Holden speaks of the "crazy cannon" from Revolutionary War days; Jack Skow, in his *Time* story, noted that Valley Forge Military Academy was "heavily fortified with boxwood hedges and Revolutionary War cannon." [5] Holden is wryly amused by the school motto: "Since 1882 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men." The school's pride in its motto is evident in Holden's negative attitude towards it. Both the motto itself and Holden's attitude have probable counterparts. Certainly Valley Forge's motto is similar in intent: "From the embattled fields of Valley Forge went men who built America; from the training fields of Valley Forge go men who preserve America." [6] The 1965 *Handbook of Private*

[4] Henry A. Grunwald, Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 18.
[5] Jack Skow, "Sonny: An Introduction," Time, September 15, 1961, p. 88.
[6] Porter Sargent, The Handbook of Private Schools (Boston: 1965), p. 8.

Schools has commercial inserts from over 150 boys schools; only two others in addition to Valley Forge reprint their motto.

There have been some attempts to find the boys who might have served as models for the characters in the novel. Skow states that some like happenings may have occurred at Valley Forge but speculates no further. Grunwald claims that a boy did run away—not Salinger himself, who was too conventional in his revolts for that—and ended up in a West Coast mental institution. He further asserts that another boy committed suicide under circumstances similar to those in James Castle's case. Regardless of the accuracy of such reports, no one has been able to demonstrate that such boys—if they actually did exist—served as models for Salinger.

Both Salinger and Holden had spent some time in Maine during summers. It was in Maine that Holden had played checkers with Jane Gallagher. Skow notes that Salinger had spent several summers at Camp Wigwam in Maine, even being voted the most popular actor.

Other particular places form a common background. Holden speaks of the Museum of Natural History, particularly of the American Indian Room. In a comment to *Story* magazine in 1944, Salinger wrote: "'I . . . am more inclined to get my New York out of the American Indian Room of the Museum of Natural History, where I used to drop my marbles all over the place.'" [7]

A final note of similarity of Salinger and Holden in young days is revealed by a comment in Skow's piece in *Time*. One of Salinger's schoolboy friends observed that Salinger was always doing slightly unconventional things, the kind of person his own family could not keep track of. Holden's non-conformity is self-evident.

Yet, it is not only as children that relevant likenesses appear. There is the previously mentioned fondness for half-truth and whimsey on Salinger's part. Ernest Haveman, in his article in *Life* tells how Salinger—in his Greenwich Village days during the early fifties—would tell fantastic stories about himself, even convincing one girl that he was the goalie for a professional hockey team. One recalls Holden's fondness for "chucking the old crap around." His entire conversation with Mrs. Morrow while on the train illustrates this point.

The editor's note *Story* magazine in 1944, introducing the story "Once a Week Won't Kill You," tells how Salinger had sent a check for $200 with his story. The check was to be used in some way as a help to young writers.[8] This act of generosity is like

[7] Story, November-December, 1944, End Pages.
[8] Story, November-December, 1944, End Pages.

Holden's giving money to the two nuns.

The adult Salinger has been much concerned with Buddhism. The two stories "Franny" and "Zooey" contain frequent references; the dedication page of *Nine Stories* contains a quotation from a Buddhist source. Haveman found an ongoing interest in Buddhism at the time of the writing of these works. Towards the end of *The Catcher in the Rye,* Holden speaks of his sister Phoebe as sitting like "one of those Yogi guys."

Phoebe is one of the few whom Holden genuinely likes. She—like Allie and the nuns and James Castle—has a kind of innocence about her that he responds to. Haveman notes that Salinger, in his Village period, had a reputation for dating "the youngest, most innocent kids he could find." [9]

The similarities extend beyond judgment in people. While Holden may have a distaste for some of the things done in films, he nonetheless knows a great deal about them and is quite concerned about certain aspects of filmdom, a side of Holden already well documented.[10] The young and adult Salinger had several relevant experiences with the acting field in general and movies in particular. Young Salinger was so interested in films that he several times expressed the wish of "grabbing the big loot as a Hollywood writer-producer," [11] and "appeared to be intensely interested in getting into the movies or in selling some of his work to Hollywood." [12] The experience at Camp Wigwam has been mentioned; there is, in addition, the evidence that he later specifically mentioned acting as a major interest when being interviewed for the McBurney School. The early Salinger interest is paralleled by Holden's constantly expressing himself in terms of film heroes. The relationship does not stop here, however. Holden is interested in films, but he frequently expresses contempt for them and what they present as well as what they do to the people associated with them. It is in this area that there is a further relationship with the adult Salinger who had some relationship with Hollywood for a brief time.

In 1949 appeared the film *My Foolish Heart* based on Salinger's "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," a short story written during the early forties. Salinger's distaste for the film was so great that he has since refused to allow any of his work to be made into films or any plays to be based on his writings. *The Catcher in the Rye* was first published in 1951, two years after the *My Foolish Heart* incident. Thus Holden's distaste for films —despite his considerable knowledge of them—parallels Salin-

[9] Haveman, op. cit., p. 138.
[10] B. S. Oldsey, "Movies in the Rye," College English (December, 1961), pp. 209-215.
[11] Skow, loc. cit.
[12] Wayne French, J. D. Salinger (New York: Twayne, 1963), p. 22

ger's. This seems fairly obvious, but there is a more important relationship.

Holden spoke of how his brother D.B. is out working in Hollywood, or as he says, "out in Hollywood . . . being a prostitute." (A further note of parallelism: D.B. wrote a book of short stories in which, according to Holden, the title story called "The Secret Goldfish" is the best. J.D. had, by this time, written and published *Nine Stories;* the most noteworthy in terms of his later preoccupation with the Glass family is "A Perfect Day for Banafish," a title quite like D.B.'s best story. *Nine Stories* also contains "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut.") The word of importance in Holden's acid description of his brother's activities is *prostitute,* if one is to accept the following.

When Salinger was a teenager and even earlier, his nickname was Sonny.[13] In *The Catcher in the Rye* Holden accepted Maurice's offer to provide a girl for him. While describing his actions while waitng for her and the conversaton he has with her, Holden uses the word *prostitute* nine times in reference to the girl. When she arrives, Holden is very reluctant to follow through and engages in what seems like idle conversation. He asks the girl her name and she replies that it is Sunny. Now, it is during these moments that Holden has some of his most discomforting experiences. Salinger—from the evidence available—felt the same way about his film experiences. The real prostitute in the novel, then, has the real name of the real man who had earlier dealt with Hollywood, "being a prostitute," in Holden's words. It is difficult to accept the idea that a writer as perceptive about human beings and as sensitive to language as Salinger is would carelessly give his boyhood nickname to a prostitute, albeit a young one, having already established his adult *alter ego* in the novel as a figurative prostitute.

J. D. Salinger no longer prostitutes himself by having relations with Hollywood. He now lives in near-solitary state in Cornish, N. H. In so doing he is fulfilling one of Holden Caulfield's boyhood dreams: the wish to escape from the world of everydayness to one of undisturbed aloneness. Holden once spoke with Sally Hayes about his wish to live "somewhere with a brook and all." Near the end of the novel, as Holden prepares to run away, he thinks of building a cabin near but not in the woods where he will live by himself with no intrusions from the outside world. Later he says:

> I'd let old Phoebe come out and visit me in the summertime and on Christmas vacation and Easter vacation. And I'd let D.B. come out and visit me for a while if he wanted a nice, quiet place for his writing, but he couldn't write any movies in my cabin, only books and stories.[14]

[13] Haveman, op. cit., p. 138.
[14] Salinger, op. cit., p. 205.